



Research Paper

Cultural Festivals and Events as Catalysts for the Development of Cultural Tourism in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism is increasingly recognized as a vital component of global travel, significantly impacting destination appeal and national economies. The objective of the research is to explore the perceptions and preferences of the international tourists visiting Sri Lanka, with particular emphasis on natural and cultural engagement. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires from fifty foreign tourists and semi-structured interviews with ten international tourists. This study employs event tourism and place attachment theories to deepen the understanding of cultural tourism dynamics, highlighting how these frameworks inform tourists' connections to cultural experiences and destinations. Results indicate a predominant preference for natural attractions, particularly beach tourism and coastal attractions, which are seen as primary draws for international visitors. However, there is also a substantial interest in cultural experiences, especially during significant events like the Kandy Perahera, which stands out for its historical and cultural richness. Kandy City emerged as a key destination, underscoring tourists' appreciation for both historical narratives and aesthetic experiences. While excursions and beach activities dominated tourist engagement, cultural events received less attention, despite positive feedback highlighting their importance in enriching the travel experience. This discrepancy suggests a potential gap in the marketing and promotion of cultural offerings. Notably, the findings indicate that enhancing the visibility and promotion of cultural festivals could effectively attract visitors year-round, particularly during off-peak months, thus helping to balance tourist arrivals. Likewise, digital marketing and social media campaigns by strengthening the travel bloggers and you tubers to create attractive content showcasing the cultural uniqueness, human stories behind the stories to promote emotionally engagement. Moreover, involvement of community can promote incorporating crafts, cuisine, sawing etc. Create travel packages including accommodation as off season incentives. This research emphasizes the necessity for effective management and branding strategies that leverage Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage to engage a diverse range of tourists. Ultimately, by integrating cultural elements into the tourism narrative and focusing on event-driven marketing, stakeholders (i.e National Tourism Board, private tourist companies, Cultural Institutions, Festival organizers, Local community, Travel and Hospitality industry, Media and influencers, Government agencies) can bolster the national economy while fostering a deeper appreciation for local traditions. This approach not only enriches the experiences of visitors but also strengthens community ties and supports cultural preservation, contributing to a more sustainable tourism framework in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Cultural Festivals, Cultural Tourism, Cultural Preservation, Event-Driven Marketing, Sustainability

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1. Introduction

Cultural tourism is identified as a swiftly expanding global social phenomenon (WTO, 2004). This complex interplay of cultural elements and tourism is increasingly recognized as a significant phenomenon within the tourism industry (Urry, 2001). This highly contributes to the growing revenue stream of nations. Culture has become fundamental in influencing travel destinations and is pivotal to the development of tourism (Akama, 2002; Reid, 2002; Richards, 2001). In this context, culture is emerging as a significant global trend, with individuals eager to engage with authentic and immersive cultural experiences. Today high number of leisure tourists are willing to get a vibrant and active cultural experiences. As a matter of fact, cultural tourism is wide spreading globally today.

This shift is fuelled by travellers eager to engage in cultural experiences, leading to heightened cultural production and consumption. As a matter of fact, the increasing fascination with culture has arguably positioned cultural tourism as one of the most significant sectors within the global tourism industry (Richards, 2010). In this setting, destinations now promote their cultural assets to attract visitors (Richard, 2021). By the end of the 20th century, cultural tourism emerged as a major segment of global tourism, with the UNWTO reporting that 40% of international tourists identified as cultural tourists. Furthermore, the UNWTO's Report on Tourism and Culture Synergies (2018), highlights the evolving dynamics of cultural tourism consumption. The report indicates a transition from an emphasis on tangible heritage to a focus on intangible heritage in both cultural consumption and production. Russo and Richards (2016) summarize the UNWTO report by noting an increasing emphasis on 'everyday life' or the concept of 'living like a local'. In this sense, the traditional view of tourism has recently broadened to include tangible cultural heritage - monuments, museums, historical buildings, and archaeological sites—and intangible¹ cultural products from contemporary society (Richards, 2000; Barrio et al., 2012). This evolution has led to greater innovation in creating

cultural products designed for tourist engagement. As Gerge Richard (2021) conceptualizes 'eventification of cultural tourism' describes the process of reconfiguring cultural practices and traditions into organized events specifically aimed at attracting tourists and promoting the national identity. Primarily, eventification of cultural tourism involves the transformation of cultural traditions, heritage, and practices into organized events or festivals that are primarily aimed at attracting tourists. Consequently, numerous countries are actively promoting cultural festivals to energize cities, attract tourists, and highlight cultural identities (Richards & Bing, 2022, p. 297). Furthermore, local festivals are increasingly utilized as tools for promoting tourism and enhancing the regional economy (Felsenstein and Flescher, 2003). In fact, steps are being taken to transforming traditional cultural practices and festivals into organized events to market for tourists. In this case, cultural events and festivals have emerged as key elements of intangible cultural heritage, increasingly highlighted in global tourism promotions. The European Travel Commission (2005) emphasizes that "cultural festivals and events are crucial for the marketing of cultural tourism, providing tourists with additional motivations to visit destinations and enhancing a location's appeal,"(p: 44) while Boo and Busser (2003) highlight that festivals are essential for shaping or reshaping destination images and play a significant role in establishing or redefining branding on national and global tourism platforms. Moreover, the European Travel Commission (2005) expresses that festivals and events are effective in attracting both first-time and returning visitors by offering unique advantages. In this case, the consumption of cultures has intensified competition among tourist destinations globally. Significantly, today, festivals and events play a crucial role in tourism management by stimulating tourism during off-peak periods. This led to the transformation of festivals by establishing connections with significant calendar dates, which are associated with specific seasons and historical sites (Lopes & Hiray, 2024 and Getz, 1997). Consequently, a wide range of festivals and events are held worldwide, highlighting various cultures and traditions. These events offer visitors compelling reasons to travel during times when accommodations are less occupied, thereby contributing to the extension of the tourist season (Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003). As D. Getz (1989) stresses, "In the long term, a recurrent and successful festival can be part of the local (or national) tourism product in order to attract visitor interest and to increase the number of tourists. Each festival –with the appropriate planning– has the potential to enrich and improve the offered tourism product and finally increase the competitiveness of the whole destination" (cited by Sofoklis Skoultos, 2014: p 62). Notably, there is a growing trend in the promotion of traditional local festivals, while in some instances, new festivals have been created specifically to attract visitors to a city or region (Felsenstein & Flescher, 2003).

¹ The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2003).

As it is recorded by the Central Bank (2015), “The Sri Lankan tourism industry, being one of the fastest growing industries of the post-conflict economy, achieved a multitude of success during 2015”. Sri Lanka has become popular tourist destination ranking in 5th place with a score of 60.53 according to compiled list of the best countries to visit in your lifetime by CEOWORLD magazine analyzing over 295,000 feedback from readers (Wilson, 2024). This illustrates the remarkable growth of tourism and country’s growing attractiveness in the global arena. Further to clarify this, Sri Lanka is framed as a travel destination in terms of cultural and eco-tourism perspectives,

“The hill country of Sri Lanka offers a wide range of experiences for travelers of all kinds, whether it’s Ayurveda treatment, unforgettable train rides, or visiting a tea plantation. The country is rich in culture and traditions, with the Poya ritual being the most significant one celebrated at Buddhist temples. Don’t miss out on the opportunity to enjoy a wholesome Sri Lankan breakfast, dine under the stars, and stay overnight in one of the country’s National Parks. Additionally, Sri Lanka is a great destination for shopping enthusiasts, who can find gems, batik, tea, handloom fabrics, leather goods, antiques, jewelry, and ceramics” (Wilson, 2014).

Sri Lanka, an island located in the Indian Ocean in the shape of a mango, inherits a rich cultural heritage characterized by diverse cultures and identities. This context highlights Sri Lanka's proud history, which is complemented by a variety of unique and shared cultural events and festivals that reflect its multicultural landscape. Apart from Esala perehera, Nallur festival, Vesak, Sinhala and Tamil festival, Duruthu perehera, traditional mask and dance festivals etc. In this research background, research attempts to examine the potential of cultural events and festivals in enhancing the tourism industry in the country. It seeks to emphasize the importance of leveraging cultural festivals as a strategic mechanism to promote cultural tourism, fostering a connection between place, culture, and tourism, and ultimately increasing tourism activity to bolster the nation’s economic capacity. It seeks to provide valuable insights for relevant officials to support future planning and decision-making, demonstrating how the strategic promotion of cultural festivals can strengthen tourism and advance cultural tourism initiatives. In this research background, the study underscores the significance of exploring cultural tourism in Sri Lanka and stresses the necessity for efficient management to support the development of the nation’s tourism industry.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Culture

Prior to forming a conceptual understanding of cultural tourism, it is crucial to explore the concept of culture itself. This complex notion does not possess a unique definition and is analyzed through a variety of approaches and perspectives by scholars. However, this research traces Edwards Tylor’s definition of culture as a favorable definition to understand cultural tourism. As he expressed in his book *Primitive Culture*, “Culture...is that whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (cited in Oatey, 2012:p 02). Additionally, Webster's New Encyclopedia Dictionary defines culture as follows: “the characteristic features of a civilization including its beliefs, its artistic and material products and its social institutions (p:244). In a nutshell, culture can be understood as the collective social heritage of humanity, encompassing the beliefs, practices, values, and artistic expressions that shape the identity and experiences of various communities distinguishing one from the other.

Scholars argue that humans share similar biological and social conditions that give rise to common cultural patterns; however, there are also notable variations within these similarities (Oatey, 2012), which contribute to the construction of notions of 'we' and 'other' in terms of difference. The differences are regarded as distinctive to specific social groups symbolizing boundaries (Lamont, 2001). Culture is frequently intertwined with national identity; however, within a single national boundary, one may find either a homogeneous culture or a diversity of cultures. In light of the importance of inclusivity and the appreciation of cultural multiplicity, there is a contemporary effort to recognize and promote various cultures within a unified national framework. Significantly, in reference to Europe, Greg Richards (1996) in *Cultural Tourism in Europe*, stressed that culture has become an important resource in tourism and creating a competitive market (p:04).

Cultural Tourism

The term cultural tourism is complex and debatable and has diverse interpretations. According to Lips (as cited in Wood, 1992), cultural tourism involves actively engaging with another culture and connecting with people and places that have a distinct identity. This form of tourism recognizes the intelligence of travelers and offers them opportunities for meaningful experiences that can be explored on various levels. Cultural tourism has remained a significant growth sector globally (Richards, 2002; Smith, 2009). As Kajzar indicates in *Cultural Tourism and World Heritage* (2014), cultural tourism is divided into seven aspects considering the different types that the tourists are seeking. They are (1)

Heritage tourism (Natural and cultural heritage - very much connected to nature-based or ecotourism); (2) Cultural thematic routes (gastronomic, spiritual, industrial etc.); (3) Cultural city tourism, cultural tours; (4) Traditions, ethnic tourism; (5) Event and festival tourism; (6) Religious tourism, pilgrimage routes (7) Creative tourism (cinema, the press, multimedia, etc.) (p: 903). Moreover, cultural tourism gives visitors the opportunity to understand and appreciate the Essentials character of a place and its culture as a whole, including its history and archaeology, people and their lifestyle, cultural diversity, arts and architecture, food and other local produce and social, political and economic structures and landscape (Zedkova and Kajzar 2013). In this case, as the above authors stressed, the existence of cultural tourism, as well as tourism in general, is contingent upon the distinctive characteristics of cultures worldwide.

As this field of tourism evolves, its definitions are continually expanding and adapting to encompass increasing diversity within the sector (Richards, 2007; Smith, 2009). Cultural tourism is valued for its various benefits in different contexts. Greg Richards (2007) notes in *Cultural Tourism* that "UNESCO advocates cultural tourism as a means of preserving world heritage, the European Commission supports it as a key industry, and newly emerging nation-states in Africa and Central Europe view it as a means of bolstering national identity" (p. 01). Thus, while cultural heritage is a vital component of national identity and economic development, culture has also become a significant factor in all tourist destinations, given that every society has its cultural attributes (Richards, 2007, p. 01).

Cultural tourism is defined by experts in the International Cultural Tourism Charter as, "Domestic and international tourism continues to be among the foremost vehicles for cultural exchange, providing a personal experience, not only of that which has survived from the past, but of the contemporary life and society of others' and according to the World Tourism Organization (2005), all forms of tourism can be seen as cultural tourism since they fulfill a fundamental human desire for diversity. Such experiences enhance personal cultural understanding and lead to new knowledge and encounters (p. 02). Moreover, cultural tourism is primarily considered a segment of tourism focused on the cultural aspects of a specific country or community (Anheier & Isar, 2008). On the hand, cultural tourism is defined in terms of education in the sense of to learn something new and knowledge discovery (Lopes and Hiray, 2024) and increasing understanding of cultural diversity.

McKercher et al. (as cited in Richards, 2007) argue that modern cultural tourism encompasses a wide range of popular cultural attractions. Richards further notes that this form of tourism has evolved from focusing solely on tangible heritage to incorporating intangible aspects of

contemporary culture (Richards, 2000). In this case, cultural tourism includes all travel-related activities in which people go to learn about one another's' cultures, beliefs, and thoughts, is important to the tourism industry (Chandrapala, 2021). Roday and Sunethra (2009) claim that cultural tourists participate in a variety of activities, including attending events centered around art, festivals, celebrations, music, theater, dance, folklore, and other cultural festivities. In fact, this is because people are often curious about other lands, people, and lifestyles. In this case, culture leads to attracting tourists.

Event Tourism

Event tourism, a specific area of cultural tourism, has grown significantly in recent years. D.Getz (1991) stresses that 'Event tourism is concerned with the roles that festivals and special events can play in destination development and the maximization of an event's attractiveness to tourists'. At the destination level, event tourism highlights the various roles that events can fulfill in promoting tourism. Among the various categories of event tourism, festivals play a vital role in promoting cultural tourism (Lopes and Hiray, 2024). It is commonly used in tourism development to address challenges of product differentiation and seasonality in a competitive market (Liu, 2012:p 499). Furthermore, Yi-De Liu (2012) asserts that events can offer both national and international visibility, significantly enhancing a city's reputation as a tourist destination. As Smith claims in *Issues in Cultural Tourism Studies* (2003), cultural events are increasingly used as a strategy for economic revitalization, urban transformation, destination rebranding, and image enhancement, attracting inward investment, and generating tourism revenue. In fact, strategically designed events can play a pivotal role in enhancing local communities, especially when they are scheduled to capture tourist interest during off-peak times. When events are purposefully planned to draw tourist attention, particularly in the off-season or shoulder season, local residents benefit from the variety, high quality, and distinctive characteristics of these events (Carmichael, 2002). However, Amila Indika stresses that the term 'event tourism' is still not commonly used in Sri Lankan context (2021,p:06).

Festivals

The term festival is deriving from 'feast' which means celebration. Festivals celebrate particular social legacy and advance the differing qualities (Lopes and Hiray, 2024). Getz (1997) characterizes festival events as "one of the most vibrant and swiftly growing categories of leisure, business, and tourism activities"(p: 01). Cultural festivals can assist local communities in showcasing cultural attributes and can offer the chance to strengthen a sense of identity (Buch et.al, 2003). Festivals are recognized as one of the rapidly expanding trends in leisure and tourism (Gunn, 1994).

International tourist

According to the Annual Statistical Report (n.d.) published by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, the definition from the International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics (IRTS) 2008 states that "an international traveler qualifies as an international visitor with respect to the country of reference if: (a) he/she is on a tourism trip and (b) he/she is a non-resident travelling in the country of reference or a resident travelling outside of it".

Festivals and cultural Tourism

The European Travel Commission (2005) reported that "cultural festivals and events are seen as an important part of the marketing of cultural tourism. They offer the tourist additional reasons to visit a place (and) they form an additional reason for cultural tourists to visit a place. They can cause a place to rise on the shortlist of places the tourist has in his or her mindset of attractive destinations. Festivals and events are both effective instruments in attracting first time visitors as well as repeat visitors due to the differential advantage they can offer (p. 44).

According to the City Tourism and Culture, A Report of the World Tourist Organization (2005), defines that "cultural tourism of "intangible heritage", where the main motive of the tourist is to observe the way of life of people, learn about their system of values, the structures of their society and their habits and emotions, as well as their religious life and customs. Festivals and traditional events are an ideal opportunity to look at these elements"(cited in Petrović, P., Barović, S. (2018).

According to Yi-De Liu in *Cultural Events and Cultural Tourism Development: Lessons from the European Capitals of Culture* (2014) asserts that In Europe, many cities are now actively developing event-based strategy as a means to develop comparative advantage in an increasingly competitive tourism marketplace, and to create local distinctiveness in the face of globalization. The ECOC has provided resources for the growth of tourism, urban and economic regeneration, and materialization of a plurality of cultures (p:510).

Greg Richards and Brian King in their article titled 'The experience of cultural festivals: evidence from Hong Kong (2022), examine three festivals in Hong Kong—Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, and Cheung Chau Bun. By assessing tourists' experiences at these events, the authors conclude that cultural festivals enhance the destination's image and influence tourist behavior. They further emphasize that such festivals can attract cultural tourists, prolong the tourist season, and enrich the local cultural landscape.

In their 2024 article, "Impacts of Cultural Events and Festivals on Cultural Tourism," Rowland Lopes and Apoorwa

Hiray emphasize the importance of various festivals and events in India. They argue that the promotion of these cultural events significantly enhances economic contributions by increasing tourism revenue, supporting local businesses, and creating jobs. Additionally, they highlight the role of cultural events in preserving and promoting heritage, as well as fostering community engagement and empowerment.

Sofoklis Skoultos in the article, *The Potential of Festivals and Their Contribution to culture and Tourism* (2014), explores the significant role of enriching the tourism experience. The author provides numerous examples from around the world, with particular emphasis on festivals in the UK, Australia, and Greece. According to the International Festival & Events Association (IFEA), more than 4.5 million festivals take place globally each year. The United Kingdom serves as a prime example of the economic benefits that festivals can bring. It is estimated that approximately 670 events and 200 prominent festivals in the UK contribute around £450 million to the economy, mainly through ticket sales, travel, and lodging costs (p: 62). The festival sector in Greece began to develop significantly in the early 1980s, when public authorities started incorporating festivals into their cultural initiatives. However, this increase in quantity did not always align with the quality of the festival experiences offered. Today, festivals in Greece vary widely in their themes, including music, theater, and art, as well as in their management styles which supporting, enhancing and developing the local economy, culture and tourism is a reality (p: 63).

As noted by Rasaq Raj in *The Impact of Cultural Festivals on Tourism* (n.d.), festivals in the United Kingdom draw cultural tourists to local events, fostering meaningful interactions between visitors and residents. Case studies, such as those of the Edinburgh Festival and the Leeds West Indian Carnival, reveal that these festivals serve as significant attractions for local, regional, and international tourists.

Furthermore, Greg Richards (2018) argues that cultural tourists represent a vital demographic for festivals and events, as they tend to spend significantly and make up approximately 40% of international tourism. By introducing variety and richness, cultural festivals and events can enhance cultural tourism in various destinations (Csapó, 2012).

In the context of Sri Lanka, there has been limited research in this area, with most scholars primarily concentrating on tangible aspects of cultural heritage. Particularly, Amila Indika in his article *Event Tourism in Sri Lanka: An Overview* (2021), points out that "The term 'event tourism' is still not commonly used in Sri Lankan context and more narrower term of 'MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) tourism' is more popular in the country" (p: 06). Furthermore the author explains that island has focused on

development of MICE tourism having small and medium size conferences. In comparison to the foreign tourists, domestic tourists in domestic event tourism comprising of religious and heritage festivals. It attracts millions of domestic tourists for the Kandy Esala festival, Kataragama festival, Madu festival and Jasmine flower festival at Anuradhapura. He stresses events have played a significant role in enhancing the destination image of Sri Lanka, with heritage events consistently contributing to this effort. Notable examples include the world's largest tea party held in Kandy and the Esala Festival. Heritage festivals represent a vital aspect of intangible cultural heritage, evolving and being reimagined in response to the growing interest from event tourists, thereby helping to preserve this heritage (p: 08). By the same author in *Sri Lankan Buddhist Festivals and Rituals as Tourism Events and Products* – keynote speech delivered at Buddhist Heritage and Tourism Symposium (2023), stresses the importance of promoting the most important Buddhist festivals and events for tourism in Sri Lanka. He suggests Vesak, Poson, Esala, Duruthu perahera, Navam perahera, Katina perahera. Furthermore, he claims that promoting these Buddhist festivals will impact in attracting large number of international tourists, generating income for local economies and preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

M.D.S Chandrapala in the article *Tourism Industry in Sri Lanka (With reference to Cultural Tourism)* (2021), argues that that Sri Lanka has seen a significant decline in the number of tourists visiting for cultural tourism. The fact that visitor numbers to the culture sector are falling shows how little attention the government has given to Sri Lanka's cultural tourism sector. To do this, the government must concentrate on preserving the nation's cultural legacy, promoting heritage places, and creating effective strategies to encourage tourists to do so. Furthermore, Reverend Wijithapure Wimarathana in the article *Cultural Tourism Potential in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka* (2016), states that “local and foreign investment is constantly flowing into the sector although religious and cultural tourism is not promoted as a special product of the industry”(p: 48).

Nonetheless, a significant research gap exists regarding the role of intangible heritage, specifically traditional festivals and events, in promoting cultural tourism in Sri Lanka. This gap highlights the potential for enhancing cultural identity and generating economic benefits. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding concerning the specific factors that affect visitor satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty related to intangible heritage experiences.

This study traces event tourism theory to understand the critical function that events—such as festivals, conferences, and sporting competitions—serve in attracting tourists and boosting the economic, social, and cultural vitality of destinations. It further analyzes different types of events,

the motivations that drive tourism, and how events affect destination image. Additionally, this research incorporates Place Attachment Theory to explore the emotional connections individuals have with places, which can influence tourism by reinforcing cultural identity, fostering visitor loyalty through repeat visits, and informing branding and marketing strategies. This research evaluates levels of cultural tourist experience based on P. Williams' (2010) five categories: (1) Purposeful Cultural Tourist, (2) Sightseeing Cultural Tourist, (3) Serendipitous Cultural Tourists, (4) Casual Cultural Tourist and (5) Incidental Cultural Tourist. Soft power in tourism will be applied to understand the ability of festivals and events to influence others through attraction and persuasion.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires administered to fifty foreign tourists departing Sri Lanka after their holiday, specifically selected to capture insights from visitors concluding their stay. For qualitative data from the same sample, ten interviewees were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to gain a thorough understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and motivations related to cultural tourism, aiming to evaluate the level of interest in festivals and events. As Irving Seidman (2013) claims, for researching personnel experiences the adequate sample size is ten individuals. The interviewees were intentionally selected in terms of age, gender, education, and region. These interviews were conducted in person getting their consent to participate. Due to the language barrier, only those who are proficient in English were intentionally selected for the interviews. Moreover, this research used policies, reports, and secondary literature about tourism and cultural festivals. The collected data were subjected to manual thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns themes and insights. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS Frequency analysis to understand trends and preferences of the responses.

Development of Tourism in Sri Lanka

The colonial administration established the Government Tourist Bureau in 1937 to cater to the significant number of cruise passengers traveling between the East and West through the Colombo port; however, following the island's political independence in 1948, the Bureau was revived at a time when the mode of tourist transport had shifted from sea cruises to air travel, leaving the country unprepared for this transition (Wimalarathna, 2016). Over time, the Ceylon Tourism Board was established in 1966. In 2007, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) was established as the government authority tasked with planning, development, regulation, and policy implementation of tourism and related industries. Prior to SLTDA being

established in 2007, these functions primarily resided with the organization known as Ceylon Tourist Board/Sri Lanka Tourist Board/Sri Lanka Tourism Board (Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority official page). Year 2007, marks another milestone in the tourism industry by introducing the Tourism Act No 38 of 2005 with the objective of promoting tourism.

Table 01: Monthly tourist arrival, 2022-2023

Month	Year 2022	Year 2023
January	82, 237	102, 545
February	96, 507	107, 639
March	106,500	125,495
April	62,980	105,498
May	30,207	83,309
June	32,856	100,388
July	47,293	143,039
August	37,760	136,405
September	29,802	111,938
October	42,026	109,199
November	59,759	151,496
December	91,961	210,352
Total	719,978	1,487,303

(Source: Monthly Tourist Arrival Report, 2023, p: 04).

The period from 1967 to 1976 saw an average annual increase of 19 percent in total overseas visitors to Sri Lanka, which further rose to an average of 23 percent per annum between 1977 and 1982 following the introduction of open economic policies (Tisdell and Bandara, 2004). Between 1980 and 1989, the arrival of tourists in Sri Lanka experienced considerable fluctuations, largely attributable to the intricate political and social dynamics of the period. Sri Lanka aimed to achieve 2.5 million tourist arrivals by the end of 2020, despite the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry. However, “in December 2023, Sri Lanka experienced a notable increase in the arrival of international tourists, reaching the peak for the entire year” (Monthly Tourist Arrival Report, 2023). This growth positions Sri Lanka as one of the premier travel destinations globally. In December 2023, Sri Lanka experienced a notable increase in visitor numbers, with India, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia emerging as key source markets. These countries were instrumental in driving the growth of tourist arrivals, significantly contributing to the

overall revitalization of Sri Lanka's tourism industry (Monthly Tourist Arrival Report, 2023). The total number of international tourist arrivals in 2023 reached 1,487,303, significantly increasing from the 719,978 arrivals recorded in 2022 (Monthly Tourist Arrival Report, 2023). The table below provides the statistics for the monthly tourist arrivals.

When further looking at the tourist arrival by region showcases the dynamics and changing patterns of the existing patterns. The trend of attracting tourists to Sri Lanka from Europe is notable, accounting for a substantial 51.4% of total arrivals, while the Asia and Pacific region follows, representing 40.5% as of December 2023 (Monthly Tourist Arrival Report, 2023).

Today, tourism has emerged as a significant driver of the economic growth of the nation. Tourism is presently among the top five exports of Sri Lanka, generating foreign earnings of US\$ 253 million in 2002 (Sri Lanka Tourist Board, 2003).

Objectives of Tourists on selecting Sri Lanka as a destination

There are multiple motivations for selecting Sri Lanka as a tourist destination among international travelers. Primarily Sri Lanka is popular for its natural and cultural characteristics to attract tourists. Typically Sri Lanka can be recognized as a destination for holidays to spend leisurely, wedding/honeymoon, business, education, medical, conferences, visiting friends and family, etc. Below chart depicts the arrival of international tourists in terms of purpose.

According to the survey findings, 60% of international tourists rated their experience as excellent, while 34.5% indicated a good level of satisfaction. Additionally, 4.6% of respondents classified their satisfaction as satisfactory, and 0.6% rated it as poor (Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2018-2019). Further inquiries regarding their intention to revisit Sri Lanka revealed that 36% of tourists expressed a strong desire to return within the next five years. Additionally, approximately 46% indicated they were somewhat likely or fairly likely to revisit, while 15% stated they had no intention of traveling back. In the survey, tourists were asked to identify their most enjoyable experiences, which were subsequently rated by the Sri Lanka Tourism Authority. The table below illustrates the areas that were most interesting to visitors during their stay in Sri Lanka.

The data presented in the table indicates that in contrast, cultural experiences received only 92 mentions, placing them at the lower end of the spectrum. This relatively low figure raises important questions about the promotion and integration of cultural tourism in Sri Lanka. Despite the rich cultural heritage the country offers, such as festivals,

traditional arts, and historical sites, these aspects do not appear to resonate as strongly with tourists compared to other attractions. Furthermore, compared to 2017, there was a 10% increase in the number of tourists visiting Sri Lanka for holidays in 2018/2019. By November 2023, the percentage of arrivals for leisure and holiday purposes increased to 58% (Monthly Tourists Arrival Report, 2023).

same data, 0.49% in their first preference, 3.36% in second preference, and 11.21% in their third preference were motivated by cultural events of the country. Similar to intangible heritage, tangible or historical heritage sites ranked low among the factors influencing tourists' decisions to choose Sri Lanka as their destination. The chart depicts the preferences of the tourists in detail.

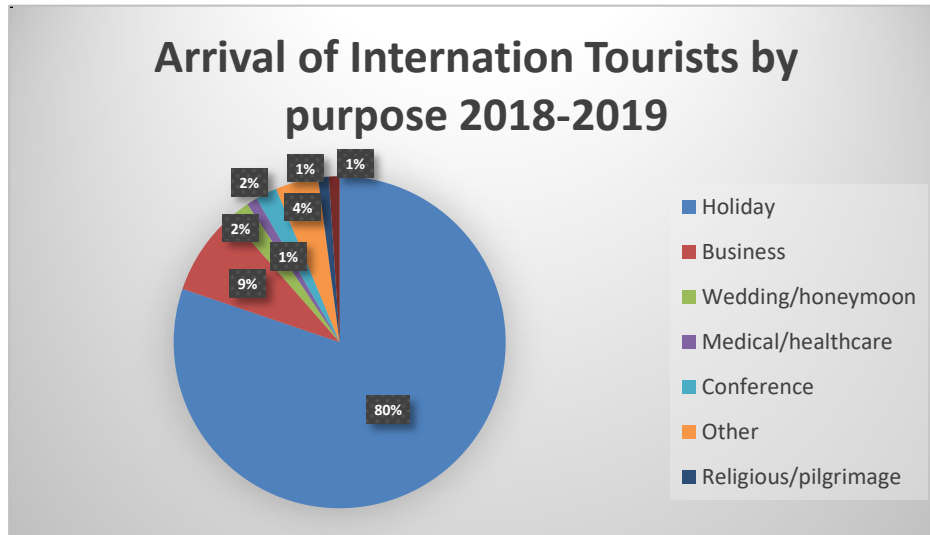


Chart 01. Arrival of International tourists by purpose 2018/2019 (Source: Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2018-2019, p: 38)

Table 02: Most enjoyed item during the visit to Sri Lanka

Most enjoyed item during the trip	Number of Tourists
Friendly people	782
Nature	663
Beach	458
Foods	293
Surfing	127
Sightseeing and Sceney	114
The beautiful landscape	111
Culture	92
Sigiriya	87
Elephants	77

(Source: Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2018-2019, P: 103)

According to the survey Report of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2017, spending holidays in various ways. Data analysis showcases many preferences areas, sun and beach, sightseeing, cultural events, historical sites, wildlife, shopping, adventure, water sports, religious, wellness/ Ayurveda, wedding location/honeymoon, and special offers. Among the various purposes for visiting, the majority of tourists (29.01%) indicated a preference for sun and beach experiences, while the second most favored purpose was sightseeing, which accounted for 22.83%. In reference to the

Furthermore, the 2017 survey conducted by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) assessed Sri Lanka's status as a tourist destination relative to other Asian countries. The findings indicate that 19.9% of respondents rated Sri Lanka as significantly better, while 16.2% considered it to be worse (Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2017, p. 62). In analyzing the places of attraction in Sri Lanka, the report records Kandy as the most popular tourist attraction in Sri Lanka, with an impressive 71.86% of respondents indicating it as a preferred destination.

This suggests that Kandy's cultural and historical significance, along with its picturesque landscapes, resonates strongly with tourists. Following Kandy, Colombo City garnered 62.25%, indicating a robust interest in the capital's urban attractions, which may include its vibrant culture, shopping, and dining experiences. The South and West Coast Beaches, at 56.38%, reflect the appeal of Sri Lanka's coastal tourism, likely attracting visitors seeking relaxation and leisure activities. Sigiriya, with 52.22%, remains a key historical site, demonstrating its importance as a UNESCO World Heritage site that offers both cultural and archaeological significance. Dambulla, at 39.86%, further supports the interest in cultural heritage, particularly in relation to its renowned cave temples. Wildlife Parks, drawing 37.82%, indicate a growing interest in ecotourism and wildlife experiences, which are vital components of Sri Lanka's diverse offerings. The Hill Country, with 32.17%,

highlights the appeal of cooler climates and scenic landscapes, popular for both relaxation and outdoor activities. Conversely, Jaffna attracted only 4.42% of respondents, suggesting a limited awareness or interest in the northern region, which may benefit from enhanced promotion. Overall, the data indicates a significant inclination towards a combination of cultural, urban, and natural attractions, with Kandy and Colombo emerging as the most popular destinations. However, data showcases the gap in enhancing the promotion of popular destinations in the sense of promoting cultural festivals and events.

Furthermore, the data indicates that tourists across various age categories exhibit a strong preference for Kandy, with the following percentages: under 20 years (79.41%), 20-29 years (76.35%), 30-39 years (68.39%), 40-49 years (62.14%), 50-59 years (71.73%), and over 60 years (70.39%). There are several factors influencing the choice of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination.

cultural events, which ranked 11th among the activities undertaken during their visits.

In conclusion, the data highlights the diverse motivations that attract international travelers to Sri Lanka, with a significant emphasis on natural beauty and cultural experiences. Kandy and Colombo emerge as the most popular destinations, reflecting the country's rich cultural heritage and urban vibrancy. While a notable percentage of tourists express satisfaction with their experiences, the relatively low interest in cultural activities indicates a need for enhanced promotion and integration of Sri Lanka's cultural offerings.

Esala Perahera in Kandy city

Sri Lanka, celebrated for its rich and diverse cultural heritage, hosts numerous cultural festivals throughout the year across the nation. Esala Perahera can be recognized in

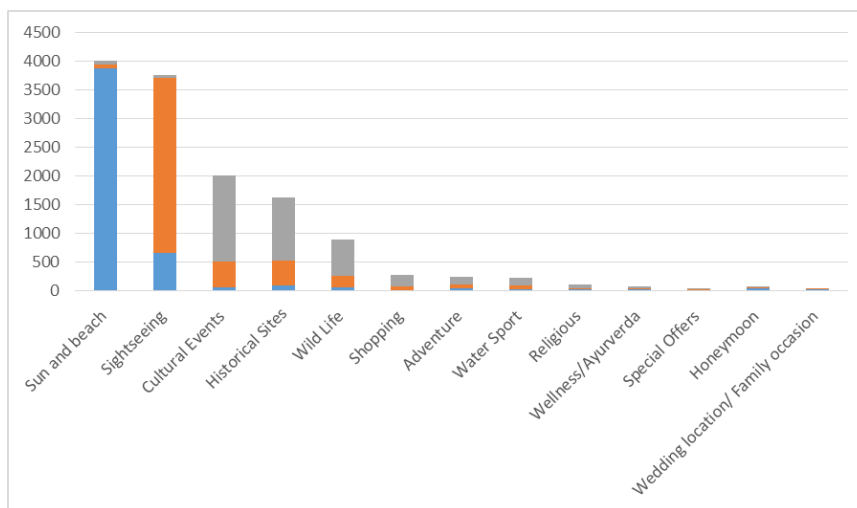


Chart 02: Holidays as main purpose of visits
(Source: Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2017, p; 45)

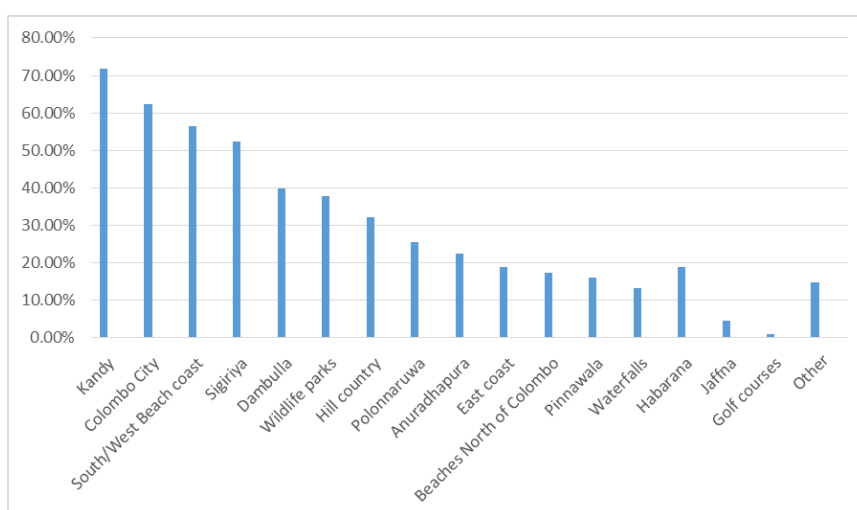


Chart 03: Places of Attraction by tourists
(Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka 2017, p. 64)

Within the context of satisfaction, culture received a rating of only 1.54%, indicating a negative implication regarding tourists' cultural experiences (p: 67). Additionally, 20% of respondents reported engaging in and participating in

terms of religious and cultural. It exhibits the historical traditions of the Buddhists and traditional local dances like – kandyan dance, fire-dance whip dances and many more. The country's cultural diversity significantly contributes to the

promotion of cultural tourism, with Kandy emerging as a prominent "festive city." The Kandy Esala Perahera, a renowned cultural event, plays a crucial role in enhancing the city's reputation through its emphasis on "festivization." This event not only attracts cultural tourists but also reinforces Kandy's image as a vibrant center of cultural celebration. In 1988, UNESCO designated Kandy as a World Heritage Site, recognizing it as one of the few remaining ancient capitals in the world, referred to as the "Sacred City of Kandy." As demonstrated by M.I. Abeyasinghe and R.G. Ariyawansa in their 2017 article, *Competitiveness of Kandy City as a Heritage Tourist Destination in Sri Lanka*, an analysis of data from three respondents visiting Kandy for a second time revealed that their primary purpose was to re-experience the Esala Perahera. Moreover, Shalika Wadipulli Arachchi in her article *An Analysis of Destination Attributes for Attracting International Millennial to Kandy City* (2020), stresses through the data analysis among ten attributes culture and history ranks the highest mean of 4.13. Among the 100 respondents interviewed, seven indicated their participation in cultural dance events, while five reported attending the Esala Perahera procession (p. 61). Moreover, the report of Monthly Tourists Arrival Report 2022 claims that an examination of tourist arrivals based on their purpose of visit indicates that a significant portion (42%) traveled to Sri Lanka for leisure or vacation. In contrast, 39% of tourists cited visiting friends and relatives as their primary reason for travel. Compared to July 2022, there was a decline in the number of visitors traveling for VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) purposes, while those arriving for leisure increased. This trend may be attributed to the Kandy Esala Perahera, which is recognized as one of the most stunning cultural celebrations in Asia.

City destination authorities increasingly leverage cultural festivals to attract cultural tourists, extend the tourism season, and enhance the local cultural atmosphere (Richard and King, 2022). Globally, the notion of 'festival cities' or 'eventful cities' (Gold and Gold, 2020) has emerged, significantly influencing destination image and tourist behavior. A prominent example of this in Sri Lanka is Kandy, which has been developed as a vibrant festival city.

Research Findings and Discussion

The data collected from structured questionnaires distributed to fifty foreign tourists in Sri Lanka provides significant insights into their perceptions and preferences about the country as a tourism destination. This investigation evaluates significant data about attractions, activities, and the overall depiction of Sri Lanka in tourists' experiences.

Perception of Attractions

Prioritized Experiences

The respondents identified sun and beach as the most significant aspect of their experience, with 15 mentions, closely followed by sightseeing at 14. This underscores the critical role that Sri Lanka's natural beauty and coastal offerings play in attracting tourists. Additional attractions included historical sites (11), wildlife (8), and cultural events (2). However, the relatively low prioritization of cultural events suggests they are less prominent in the overall tourist experience.

Chart 04. Purpose of visiting to Sri Lanka

Aspect of Experience	Frequency (Number of Mentions)	Percent age (%)	Key Insights
Sun and Beach	15	30.0%	Most popular; attracts younger tourists (25-45), especially from Europe/North America
Sightseeing	14	28.0%	High interest among educated tourists; includes scenic travel and city tours
Historical Sites	11	22.0%	Especially favored by older tourists (45+); includes visits to ancient capitals
Wildlife	8	16.0%	Attracts eco-tourists; interest across age groups, particularly nature lovers
Cultural Events	2	4.0%	Least mentioned, interest exists but low awareness beyond major events like Kandy Perahera and Sinhala and Tamil new year.
Total	50	100%	

Moreover, data showcases that males and females aged between 25- 45 more interested in eco-tourism, while older international tourists who are above 45 years are more likely to visit historical sites. Those who were between the 25-50 ages visitors with higher educational level interest in experiencing the historical significance of the country. However, according to data majority of foreign tourists mentioned that they are likely to experience the cultural

events of the country but they were not much aware about it other than the Kandy perehera of the country. According to one foreign tourists from Russia aged 52,

“We came a group of retired teachers from Russia a couple of week ago. We visited Sigiriya, Kandy, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa which were really attractive places that I have ever visited before. Significantly Sigiriya, ohhh. Its paintings are really fascinating. I am sure that the Sri Lankans might have nice cultural values that can be shared with us. But unfortunately we were not much exposed but considerably to Sri Lankan cuisine, crafts we saw and bought to take back. I got a table cloth with nice decorated white flowers from Galle fort. And also I love Sri Lankan traditional procession. Again I hope to come to Sri Lanka to experience it” (Personal Communication on 03rd September 2024)

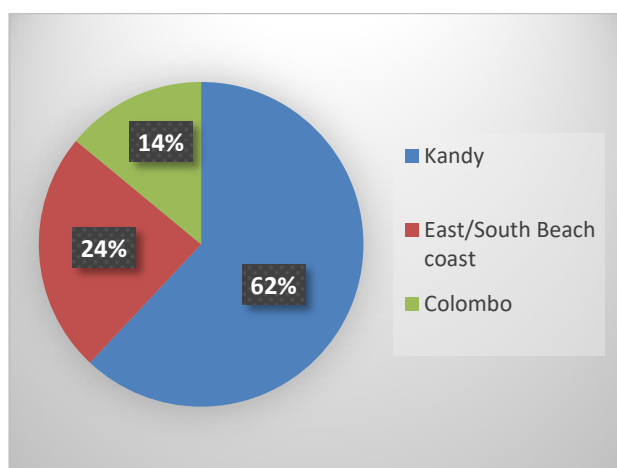


Chart 05. Most attractive cities

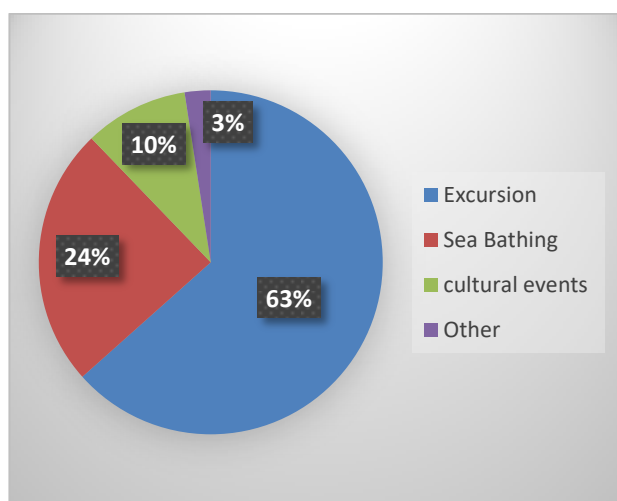


Chart 06. Activities engaged during the visit

According to data, despite their potential for great interest, cultural events are low prioritized in typical travel itineraries. Despite the fact that many expressed interest in cultural events, the majority of tourists (38) are primarily aware of the Kandy Esala Perahera and rarely about the Sinhala and

Tamil New Year. As a matter of fact, the Kandy perehera serves as a prominent showcase in every aspect of tourism and highlights the cultural uniqueness of Sri Lanka. However, in this case, data demonstrates a significant gap exists between interest and awareness, indicating an untapped market for cultural tourism events in Sri Lanka.

Specific Preferences

Among the destinations, Kandy City emerged as the most favored, with 31 respondents citing its historical significance. This indicates that tourists are not solely interested in aesthetic experiences; they also seek cultural and historical narratives that enrich their travel. The Eastern beach coast received preference from 12 respondents, reinforcing the appeal of coastal activities including bathing, surfing, and boat tours to watch corals etc. Additionally, Colombo City, chosen by 7 respondents for its urban beauty, highlights a growing interest in urban tourism as travelers seek diverse experiences beyond natural landscapes and historical sites.

Engagement in Activities

The activities in which participants engaged reflect their preferences during their visit:

- **Excursions** were the most common activity, reported by 26 respondents, suggesting a strong appreciation for exploration and guided experiences that facilitate engagement with multiple attractions.
- **Sea bathing**, with 10 mentions, aligns with the prioritized emphasis on sun and beach, further underscoring the significance of coastal activities in the tourist experience.
- Interest in **visiting historical sites** was noted by 9 respondents, reinforcing the value placed on cultural heritage and supporting Kandy City's prominence due to its historical relevance.
- The lower engagement in **cultural events** (4 mentions) indicates that, while these elements contribute to the overall experience, they may not serve as the primary motivation for tourists.

In the semi-structured interviews, participants described Sri Lanka as ‘culture’ as being profoundly represented by the Kandy Perahera, which they regarded as one of the most unique and enriching cultural events they had ever experienced. Three respondents have intentionally chosen Sri Lanka as their destination to experience the Kandy Perahera. These tourists can be identified as purposeful cultural tourists who are primarily motivated to visit a specific destination and the tourist seeks a very deep

experience. As one of the tourists from the United Kingdom, aged 42 mentioned,

"I like to experience the differences between cultures. Especially the Asian region. My husband and I have traveled to many regions, like India, and hope to travel to Malaysia as well. We had a great time in Sri Lanka. We wanted to witness the beauty of the Kandy procession. It is so unique. There were also a lot of dancers and drummers, and it was so colorful. The most attractive event was the graceful elephants. It's wonderful and amazing. Sri Lanka is full of dazzling festivals that are very unique" (Personnel communication on 03rd September 2024).

Furthermore, data indicates that a significant number of tourists (10) who visited Sri Lanka did so primarily for nature and sightseeing experiences, while also engaging with the local culture by participating in the Kandy Perahera festival. These individuals can be classified as serendipitous cultural tourists (Williams, 2010), as they do not travel primarily for specific cultural reasons; however, they ultimately engage in a profound cultural tourism experience. This exposure led to a sense of wonder and excitement regarding the unique beauty of the local cultures, which they had not anticipated. For instance, a 25-year-old tourist from the United States remarked that,

"I came to Sri Lanka with my family and relatives primarily to experience the wildlife, and I really love the beaches here, especially as an environmental enthusiast. However, during our visit to Kandy, guided by our tour leader, we witnessed the Buddhist procession, which provided me with an unexpectedly marvelous experience. I truly appreciate Sri Lankan culture. I thought it is better if I was able to experience a little more. Really lucky to see the fireball dancers in the procession. Sri Lanka is a country with rich cultural traditions. If I come back, definitely I want to experience the procession and also taste the traditional food of Sri Lankans. This time I was not that much aware of cultural events other than the Kandy procession" (Personal communication, September 4, 2024).

When they were asked how they pictured Kandy, various replies were emerged. As 'A city full of culture', a 'festive city', a 'traditional and 'A place with lots of festivals, events and heritage'. All these comments on the city of Kandy showcase the willingness of the tourists to experience the exoticness. The majority of the sample of tourists had positive attitudes towards cultural tourism in terms of intangible heritage. The participants demonstrated a strong interest in exploring novel experiences, expressing a desire to "discover new things." Additionally, they indicated a fascination with immersing themselves in the distinctiveness

of unfamiliar cultures, highlighting their eagerness to engage with and understand cultural practices, traditions, and lifestyles that differ from their own. This enthusiasm for cultural exploration reflects a broader trend among travelers seeking to enhance their understanding of global diversity.

Data analysis reveals that cultural tourists often visit Sri Lanka during the Kandy Perahera period. Tourist arrival statistics for 2023 show a significant increase in visitor numbers in July and August. Notably, aside from the Kandy Perahera, many tourists have not engaged in other parallel cultural events, such as the Colombo Vel Festival and the Nallur Festival. Moreover, a majority of tourists (34) expressed a desire to further immerse themselves in Sri Lankan culture.

Moreover, the profile of cultural tourists and interests gaps indicates less awareness of tourists about the rich culture of Sri Lanka inherits. 34 have mentioned about their desire to explore more cultural experiences, while three of the tourists can be identified as cultural tourists those who were here to witness the Esala perehera. However, majority of the tourists are eco and adventure tourists who were to Sri Lanka to experience the sun, beach and wildlife. In their travel itineraries, they are eager to visit cultural and historical sites, but show less interest in—or awareness of—the country's intangible heritage. Sri Lanka, as a diverse society, inherits a wealth of vibrant events and festivals celebrated throughout the year, which can be showcased to the world. Impressively countries in Asia like India, Thailand, and Japan are promoting their cultural events to attract cultural tourists. In this case, it is crucial to address the gap in a way of converting the eco and adventure tourists to cultural tourists meaningfully experiencing the intangible heritage of Sri Lanka.

The findings demonstrate broader trends in the research on cultural tourism: while natural attractions often generate early tourist interest, cultural engagement enhances the destination's image, increases satisfaction, and cultivates loyalty (Richards, 2007; McKercher & du Cros, 2002). The prestigious Kandy Perahera designation raises the prospect of a national strategy to promote other cultural celebrations. Data analysis regarding Kandy reveals that events enhance both the destination's image and tourist behavior. The results indicate that advocating for the notion of "eventfulness" can successfully draw a greater influx of tourists. This intentional focus on events may not only augment Kandy's overall allure but also significantly contribute to its branding and marketing, establishing it as a dynamic and captivating destination for prospective guests.

Recommendations for enhancing event-driven tourism in Sri Lanka

Simultaneously with cultural tourism, numerous nations globally are striving to showcase their cultural values to the world. Event-based tourism is evolving to provide active cultural experiences for travelers. It benefits a country in two ways. On one hand, attract tourists, enhance revenue, and promote cultural identity globally. In light of the findings and the clear disconnect between tourist interest and awareness of cultural events, the subsequent section presents strategic recommendations aimed at utilizing Sri Lanka’s abundant cultural heritage to enhance event-driven tourism throughout the year.

Sri Lanka is a diverse nation that hosts a rich tapestry of cultures and religious festivals, each reflecting the various lifestyles and traditions of its people. In addition to Esala perahera, a variety of festivals are celebrated by the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims in Sri Lanka, each highlighting the distinctiveness of the nation’s cultural heritage throughout the year. There are a number of events marked in the event calendar. The table below summed up the major festivals and events celebrated in the country that can be taken to the world for the attraction of international tourists throughout the year.

Table 03. Major festivals and events celebrated in Sri Lanka throughout the year

Festival	Time duration	Specialty of the festival and event
Thai Pongal	January	Hindu festival honouring the sun god Surya. Celebrated at Hindu temples
Duruthu Perehera in Kelaniya	January	A cultural glorious procession is celebrated by the Buddhists in the historic temple Kelaniya Rajamaha Viharaya.
Nawam Perahera	February	Colombo Nawam perahera or Gangaram perahera is alive with the sounds of the drums, colorful lights and graceful elephants.
Sinhala and Tamil New Year	April	Celebrate the Sun God’s passage from Pisces to Aries. This is an extravagant festival with a number of traditional games like – pillow fighting, climbing a greased tree, breaking a pot blindfolded, feeding curd to blindfolded, and many more.
Vesak Festival	May	Celebrated by Buddhists commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of Lord Buddha. However, this is a joyous occasion that is colourful with lights, lanterns and pandals and many more showcasing the talent and creativity of the Buddhists.
Poson Festival	June	Celebrated by the Buddhists. Significantly, central celebration is centered in Anuradhapura Mihintale symbolizing the arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Arhath Mahinda Thero. Same as the Vesak festival this is colorful with lights, lanterns, and pandals.
Esala Perehera	July	Celebrated in Kandy demonstrating major unique cultural events in the country. (discussed in detail in the above sub-topic)
Kataragama Esala perahera	July	This showcases both Sinhala and Tamil cultural traditional cultural aspects. This is a dazzling event with whip crackers, and many traditional dancing events comprise of Kadyan, low-country, and Sbaragamuwa and also a vibrant elephant.
Colombo Vel Festival	July	Celebrated by Hindus signifying the victory of Sri Murukan over evils. Journey of chariots showcases the traditional beliefs of the Hindus. Particularly, the hanging people from hooks is a prime event of this festival. Chariot is alive with Nateshwara music.
Nallur Festival	August/September	This is one of the major religious events in Jaffna. The center of the celebration is Kandaswami temple. This commemorates Lord Murugan, Goddesses Valli and Deivanai. The procession comprises chariots with drummers and dancers.
Navathri Festival	October	Celebrated by the Tamil Hindus particularly in Jaffna, Trinocmalee and Batticoloa worshipping the divine feminine. This event is full of Hindu rituals and mythology, South Indian music and dance, devotional traditions etc.
Shanthikarma	Organizing in any month of the year (particularly	Shanthikarma is consisted of Kandyan and Low-country dancing systems for health, blessing, and protection. This is full of traditional music, folks, and dancing. Specially this uses the getabera and Yakbera with many

	during the off seasons)	slokas and stanzas.
Rukada Natya	Organizing in the any month of year (particularly during the off seasons)	A traditional form of puppet theater.

It is important to mention that the bolded festivals and events were not in the event calendar but much rich in traditional cultural identity. It is necessary to consider these festivals by the officials to promote cultural tourism in future. As a matter of fact, in future plans Proper promotion

of these festivals and events as ‘soft power’ would have the potential to enhance the branding and destination marketing. Particularly Shanthikarma as a diminishing traditional cultural element, Gayathri Panampitiya and Rev.T. Dhammissara Thero (2019), stress the importance of shamthikarma as soft power for country branding of Sri Lanka.

To engage with the data presented in Table 01, an analysis reveals the underlying factors influencing fluctuations in tourist arrivals throughout the year. Notably, the period from January to March demonstrates a consistent increase in arrivals, followed by a decline in April and May. A significant resurgence occurs from June to August, yet another decrease is observed in September. Ultimately, December marks the peak of tourist arrivals. This analysis highlights the necessity of promoting cultural festivals during low tourist months to bolster visitor numbers. Additionally, there is potential to enhance overall attendance by addressing the needs and expectations of tourists throughout the year. Interviews with visitors indicate a strong interest in cultural tourism, emphasizing their desire to experience diverse cultural practices within the country. Given that April and May reflect lower tourist arrivals, strategic initiatives such as organizing the Sinhala and Hindu New Year, Vesak festival, and Shanthikarma could be implemented as soft power strategies. These events would not only enhance the cultural experience for international travelers but also foster a deeper sense of place, enriching their engagement with the destination. Moreover, when comparing the number of tourist arrivals in July 2018, which reached 217,829, (Monthly Tourists Arrival Report, 2022), it is evident that this figure has not been matched in 2023. This disparity underscores the critical need for effective promotion and branding of Sri Lanka's cultural tourism. Enhancing visibility and appeal in this sector is essential to attracting a greater number of visitors and revitalizing the tourism industry.

The promotion of the festivals and events highlighted above plays a crucial role in integrating tourism, enhancing branding, and fostering a sense of place in less-visited regions such as Jaffna. This assertion is supported by data from the Survey of Departing Foreign Tourists from Sri Lanka (2017), which indicates that these areas are not currently attracting significant tourist attention.

Conclusion

The research examined the preferences and perceptions of international visitors who visited Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on cultural and natural engagement. The results indicate that the country's iconic landscape and historical landmarks are the primary attractions for international visitors, which illustrates a lack of awareness regarding the intangible cultural heritage, particularly religious and cultural Festivals. The Kandy Esala procession stands out as a pivotal element of the travel itinerary. Nonetheless, the lack of a thorough understanding of various cultural events, including the Nallur festival, the Colombo Vel festival, Shanthikarma, and Rukada Natya, underscores a gap between the cultural assets we possess and their recognition by international visitors. Tourists are frequently not exposed to the diverse traditions of Sri Lanka, despite a significant interest in experiencing the country's culture.

The aforementioned pertains to the organization of religious and cultural festivals in order to enhance Sri Lanka's status as a year-round tourist destination. This method significantly enhances the tourist calendar by incorporating the culturally vibrant events and festivals of Sri Lankans, which are less well-known, thereby attracting visitors even during the off-peak season. Through the strengthening of national branding, this initiative has the potential to considerably increase the prominence of Jaffna and Batticaloa, thereby expanding their recognition beyond their traditional areas. The examination highlights the dual aspects of cultural tourism in Sri Lanka, differentiating between those who travel with the explicit purpose of engaging in cultural experiences and those who, while initially drawn to nature or wildlife, find themselves deeply engaged in cultural activities. This indicates a wider trend among travelers keen to engage with various cultural practices, highlighting the necessity of providing meaningful experiences that align with their interests.

To provide an enriched cultural experience for foreign tourists, digital marketing can serve as an effective tool in collaboration with travel bloggers, You Tubers, and influencers to convey the narratives and traditions associated with festivals and events in an engaging manner to global audiences. Another strategy is to get the communities involved through incorporation of traditional crafts, sewing, weaving, culinary experiences to enhance the authenticity of the traditions. It is important to introduce travel packages including accommodation, festival participation and cultural workshops as off season incentives. Moreover, for an inclusive tourism stratify it is crucial the collaboration of key stakeholders including National Tourism Board, private companies, cultural institutions, festival organizers, hospitality providers, media, government agencies etc. these may help in transforming Sri Lanka's cultural heritage into a sustainable tourism product that supports local economies, preserving national cultures and fostering community pride.

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